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One vague word_____

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WASHINGTON — In the fine art of treaty negotiation — especially with the Soviet Union — the need to be exact is so important that if the two sides don't agree on the definition of a crucial word, the treaty isn't worth the paper it's written on.

There's no better example of this than the use of the vague word "rapid" in the U.S.-Soviet Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty. In fact, a recent classified White House report is devoted to the problems that have arisen over the possible definitions of "rapid" as it applies to the reloading capability of ABM interceptor missile launchers.

The 1972 treaty banned "rapid reloading" of ABM interceptors. But the exact definition of "rapid" wasn't spelled out in the treaty.

The whole point of the treaty was to prevent either side from achieving a strategic missile defense so effective that it might be tempted to launch a first strike. The idea was to make sure a nuclear war would be unwinnable, and perceived to be such by both sides.

So the two superpowers agreed to limit their deployed interceptor missiles to 100 each. That meant that only a maximum of 100 of the thousands of incoming missiles could be destroyed by the interceptors.

Unfortunately, the treaty did not limit the number of interceptor missiles that each side can build and stockpile. All it did was prohibit the development, testing or deployment of "automatic or semi-automatic or other similar systems for rapid reload" of the permitted launchers.

The negotiating record indicates that the intent was to keep either side from bringing to bear "more than 100 ABM missiles during an engagement." The U.S. team indicated it had a "strategically significant time" in mind. But none of this was clearly spelled out.

The reason these oversights have become a problem, according to the

White House report, is that "in 1983, the Soviets conducted training and firing of ABM missiles which demonstrated an ability to reload and launch interceptors in a period that was not more than 2½ hours and could have been less."

Is 2½ hours a "rapid reload"? U.S. experts haven't been able to decide.

The report notes that an American plenary statement once defined "rapid" as "a reloading time which would be shorter than the time period of an engagement." Whereupon a Soviet negotiator pointed out that "an initial engagement might last only a few minutes."

The U.S. negotiators agreed that "the most likely scenario for nuclear conflict (involves) an intense attack ... within a short period — 5 to 10 minutes — against the ABM-defensed area." This suggests that "rapid reload" would be something under 10 minutes.

Consequently, the Americans told the Soviets they wouldn't be obliged to modify their Galosh interceptor to comply with the treaty. The CIA estimated it would take a minimum of 15 minutes to reload a Galosh launcher — though the Soviets, interestingly enough, never confirmed this CIA estimate.

In one early negotiating session, an American official "asked how long it took to reload Galosh," according to the report, which added: "(Gen.) Alekseyev sidestepped the specifics, but stated that it took considerable time to move the missiles in their silos, to load them, etc. Alekseyev said it would take hours, if not a day."

This led some U.S. officials to view that anything less than "hours" would violate the "rapid reload" provision of the treaty. But the Soviets haven't agreed to that interpretation and to this day nobody is sure. As the White House report concludes: "There clearly is uncertainty in the obligation, as evidenced by the several interpretations."